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ABSTRACT

From sociolinguistic and dialect research have merged three hypotheses concerning the comparison of American Negro and white speech: (1) there is little difference in the linguistic usage of Negroes and whites of similar socioeconomic status; (2) Negroes have a separate dialect with its own phonological, grammatical, and lexical features; and (3) some language features, while not exclusive to Negroes, are used more often by them than by whites. The data from the author's investigation tends to support the third position. A statistical difference significant at the .01 or .05 level seems to confirm the author's hypotheses that Negro children and adults show a higher proportion of nonstandard grammatical forms than do the corresponding white children and adults, and that the children show proportionately higher nonstandard usage than do their parents. The data here suggest that differences between the races decrease with age. Discussed also are methods used to collect and analyze data, and recommendations for selecting informants, questionnaires and outside consultants. (AMM)

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Field Techniques

in an Urban Language Study

by
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From research in the fields of sociolinguistics and dialect geography there have emerged three hypotheses with respect to the speech of Negroes compared to that of whites. First, the evidence from the Linguistic Atlas Project, as reported by Atwood, is that there is little difference in the linguistic usage of Negroes and whites of similar socioeconomic status. Secondly, it is hypothesized that Negroes have a separate dialect with its own phonological, grammatical, and lexical features. Third, there is the position that some language features, while not exclusive to Negroes, are used more often by them than by whites. It is this third position, with respect to grammar, that the data from my own investigation tends to support.

It becomes evident from reviewing the literature, that the methods used to collect and analyze data will strongly influence the conclusions drawn from any study of the social distribution of language features. In the Linguistic Atlas Project, for example, direct eliciting was the primary method of obtaining data. If an investigator wanted to elicit the past tense form of the verb <u>freeze</u>, he could ask what happened the last time the informant put water in the coldest part of the refrigerator. Here the informant's attention is drawn directly to certain language features which are being investigated. More recent investigations have attempted to draw the attention of the informants away from the speech forms themselves and onto the message being communicated, by using free conversations, and by having the informants respond to pictorial stimuli. Another recent technique, that of asking informants to repeat standard English utterances, has elicited a surprising amount of non-standard speech, perhaps because of the short time between stimulus and

response, or because there is a kind of immediate translation which takes place. An investigator asking an informant to repeat: Ask him if he can go, may get as a response: Ask him can he go.

My own investigation utilized all these techniques in a study of nonstandard grammar among working-class families of Alexandria, Virginia, near Washington. The study compares the speech of both Negro and white children, and their parents, in a southern dialect area, whereas previous studies had centered on children or adults alone, or on informants living outside the South. From these studies there developed the term Nonstandard Negro English, perhaps without adequate investigation of the great similarity there might be between Nonstandard Southern Negro and Nonstandard Southern White varieties of English.

The term nonstandard is an imprecise one, yet we might say negatively that it is a variety not ordinarily used by educated people of a given speech community, in formal situations. There is no doubt that it is systematic, rather than consisting of careless deviations from a more pure variety.

The sample type as well as the eliciting techniques appear to affect linguistic data. In the Alexandria study, it was thought that nonstandard English was most likely to be found among families whose parental occupations were of the blue collar type, whose formal education was that of high school graduate or less, and whose place of residence could be described as modest. It was also thought that nonstandard grammar would be more evident among kindergarten children, who had not yet been exposed to formal grammar instruction, than among adults.

The Director of Elementary Education of the City of Alexandria and the Kindergarten Supervisor granted permission for the investigator to visit kindergarten classrooms in order to gather data for the study. A sample of twelve kindergarten children, plus twelve parents, was selected for interviews. The kindergarten children selected attended the two public elementary schools which in the judgement of the school officials best represented blue-collar worker families in Alexandria. This judge-

ment sample may have led to different results from the study than a random sampling of all kindergarten children from working-class families.

There were four subgroups in the sample with six persons in each group. The subgroups were Negro children, white children, Negro adults, and white adults. The number in each group was limited by the number of white children in the kindergarten classes which were predominantly Negro, since there were to be equal numbers of individuals in each subgroup. The small number of informants permitted the investigator to do in-depth interviewing with a variety of techniques.

The fieldwork design had the investigator arrange all the children's interviews himself, after he had observed them for three days in their classroom setting and had participated in their daily activities. When rapport had been established with a child, he was asked if he would like to come with the investigator to tell some stories. The answer was always affirmative. Then the investigator would escort the child to a small separate room in the school where a tape recorder was set up. The investigator told the child that he had a surprise, that the child could hear his own voice if he spoke near the microphone.

The investigator started the recorder and asked three questions, one about the name of the informant, another about his age, and a third about the number of his brothers and sisters. A replay of the tape invariably pleased the child. Then the investigator indicated that he could hear more of his voice as he answered more questions. This procedure usually sufficed to induce the child to express himself orally, especially since the investigator had become a familiar figure around the school.

The adult interviews were arranged by telephone. It was explained to the parents that the schools were permitting the investigator to collect speech samples from the children, and that samples from the parents were wanted also, for comparison. A note had been sent from the kindergarten teacher previous to the phone call, explaining the project. It is, I think, significant that there were no interview refusals on the

part of either the parents or the children.

The questionnaire is another part of an investigation that can influence the results. The questionnaire for the Alexandria study contained items selected from previous urban language studies, such as those conducted by Labov, Shuy, and Baratz. The children's questionnaire had four parts. The first part consisted of questions asking for narrative. They were concerned with favorite television programs, children's animal stories, what policemen and firemen do, play activities, and other members of the family. These questions succeeded in bringing out the use of third person singular present tense verb forms such as She works or She cook, use or not of the verb be in expressions like He a truck driver or He's my father, the past tense of the verb Be for plural subjects as in They were in the other room, or They was at school, the use or not of inflected Be with verbs ending in -ing such as in They're playing or They singing, and, to a lesser extend, other parts of the interview.

After the interview was over, too, changes occurred in the speech of the adults, but not in that of the children. One informant, when asked to give the opposite of That dog wants some food during the interview, said, "That dog doesn't want any food," but when the interview was over and part of it was being replayed to her, she said, "That don't sound like me."

Other examples of changes after the interviews were these:

During: "I think he can tie his shoes by himself."
After : "He was doin' that by hisself."

During: "I want some of those pencils.
After : "Get them dogs outa here!"

During: "My friends were at the party."
After : "They was at school."

The children who were interviewed, on the other hand, did not appear to be nervous or on guard when talking in front of the tape recorder. Their speech during the interview did not vary greatly from what the investigator had heard in the kindergarten classroom; conversa-

tions before and after reflected the same type of grammatical usage. Grammar features recorded from different parts of the interview were almost always the same. An interesting project would be to determine at what age different styles begin to appear in children's speech.

Having commented on the methods of the investigation, let us turn now to the results, which are summarized on the handout.(p. 11)

The hypotheses were that Negro children and Negro adults would show a higher proportion of nonstandard grammatical forms than would the corresponding white children and white adults, and secondly that the children would show proportionately higher nonstandard usage than would their parents.

A statistical difference significant at the .01 or .05 level confirms the hypothesis. It is important to use confidence levels in sociolinguistic analysis because otherwise, seemingly high percentage differences may have come about because of chance or because of sample error. A seemingly high difference in percentage of nonstandard usage of 15 or 20 per cent may turn out upon statistical analysis to be not significant. Such was the case in comparing Negro and white adults in the Alexandria study. There were no significant differences between the Negro and white adult groups, although the higher percentage of nonstandard usage recorded in the Negro group appeared to be significant. Similarly, a situation reported by Roger Shuy in Detroit where there was a 17 per cent difference in group usage among blacks and whites turned out to be significant when I applied the same statistical test I apply to my own data. The test was suggested to me by Dr. Edith Huddleston of the National Institutes of Mental Health.

As you see on the handout (p. 11), the two most highly significant differences, (.01) and two of the three less significant differences (.05) involved Negro children. The two significant differences involving problems one and two when comparing white and Negro children were not significant in comparing the white adults with the Negro adults. These data suggest that differences between the races decrease with age.

In column four, two significant differences were found when comparing the Negro children with their parents. One significant difference appeared when comparing white children with their parents. Larger samples might have reavealed more significant differences.

It is interesting to note that the two features that varied according to race among the children, problems one and two, reflect parallel grammatical usage in the West African Languages studies by Turner. The question of possible influences of an African substratum on the English spoken by Negroes is still wide open.

Finally, I should like to make some recommendations for future studies based on my own experience. They have to do with the selection of informants, the questionnaire, and outside consultants. The informants should represent well the population being studied. A random sampling would be ideal. A good method of finding informants is through the school system, though this limits the population to those who have school age children. There is less likelihood of interview refusals with the help of school officials.

The informants need to be put at ease when being interviewed. The more friendly the interviewer and interviewee are toward each other, the more liklihood there is of obtaining spontaneous speech. In addition, it was found helpful to play back portions of the interviews to encourage the interviewees to speak.

Secondly, with respect to the questionnaire, since different stimuli gave different results, it would be advisable, especially when dealing with adults to include more than one kind of eliciting technique. It may be possible to include comments made after the interviews as a separate technique.

Third, outside specialists can be of great help in an urban language study. Consulting with a child psychologist, a sociologist, and a statistician will undoubtedly clear up many of the problems that may be encountered. The statistician, especially, can give advice on sample size and selection, and point out the information that would be necessary

to establish levels of statistical significance. Thus social language study is truly an interdisciplinary affair.

Field Techniques in an Urban Language Field Study

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TYPES OF PROBLEMS	W vs. ADULT	W vs. N. CHILD	W CHILD vs. ADULT	N CHILD vs. ADULT
(1) He my friend		.01		.05
(2) He run		.05		
(3) Double Neg.				
(4) They was here.				
(5) He don't know			.05	
(6) He hurt hisself.				.01
(7) See them dogs.				
(8) They hurt thei(r) self				

Hypothesis #1: Negroes will show a higher proportion of nonstandard usage than will whites.

Hypothesis #2: Children will show a higher proportion of nonstandard usage than will their parents.